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## SEX EDUCATION IN THE DIGITAL ERA

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# Feeling ‘Blue’: Pornography and Sex Education in Eastern Africa\*

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**Abstract** This study examined young people’s exposure to sexually explicit media (SEM) in Ethiopia and Uganda, where comprehensive sexuality education is often lacking or even non-existent. Through mixed-method, youth-centred participatory research, young people affirmed the ubiquity of pornography – even in communities with little access to the internet. Male and female study participants aged 12–26 said they turned to pornography because they lacked adequate sex education – much of which was designed and run by adults who did not understand their diverse needs. By contrast, they felt pornography delivered the information they needed in an exciting manner. At the same time, young people recognised that pornography use could sometimes have too much influence over their developing sexual identities and practices. Youth in both countries called for more and better comprehensive sexuality education for the whole community, allowing for more open dialogue about sexuality – issues that they acknowledged can be compounded by their consumption and production of pornography.

**Keywords:** Ethiopia, pornography, sexual economy, sex education, sexually explicit media, social media, youth, Uganda.

## 1 Introduction

A 2013 rapid evidence assessment of pornography’s effects on young people confirms that nearly all the literature available on young people’s exposure to pornography and other sexually explicit media (SEM) refers to the global North. Horvath *et al.* (2013) found that children had widespread access to pornography and were likewise exposed almost constantly to sexually explicit imagery through a media-saturated culture. This had negative (and gendered) implications for young people’s attitudes towards consent and objectification (Wright and Funk 2014), as well as unrealistic and maladaptive expectations of sex and relationships (Horvath *et al.* 2013).

Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) programmes in Western countries are only now starting to deal substantively with the inundation of SEM through new and social media – of which young people are

early adopters (Castells *et al.* 2007). This may be too late, however, as many children also report producing and distributing their own SEM through information and communications technology (ICT) such as phones and computers (e.g. 'sexting'). Pornography therefore continues to be the 'elephant in the room' when it comes to global sexuality education. Sex education programmes in developing countries tend to similarly discount the increasing presence of explicit media as a mode of sexual information that influences young people's sexual decision-making – especially in the absence of comprehensive adolescent sexual and reproductive health (ASRH) information (Horvath *et al.* 2013). Though studies indicate increasing mobile phone and internet use, especially among out-of-school youth (Save the Children 2014; Swahn, Braunstein and Kasirye 2014), very few studies have considered young people's exposure to SEM in developing country contexts through these and other media outlets (Day 2014). Nonetheless, our formative research findings with youth peer researchers (YPRs) in a separate Save the Children Project – which strove to better situate CSE curricula in local contexts – indicated that SEM such as violent and misogynist hard-core pornography are in fact widespread in urban and rural project areas in Ethiopia and Uganda. Qualitative interviews with youth indicated that mobile phones, internet and video are all common means of receiving and exchanging SEM – whether one owns a phone or video player or not – and that children as young as eight are consuming such media forms (Save the Children 2014).

We thus suspected that violent SEM might further undermine the quality of ASRH information and negatively affect young people's – especially girls' – freedom of choice in developing healthy sexual relationships. These factors pointed to a clear need for more in-depth research to better understand the ways and extent to which pornography and other SEM influence young people's sexual identity development and decision-making.

## 2 Context

In Ethiopia 42 per cent of the population is 10–29 years old (Central Statistical Agency 2014) while Uganda has the world's second youngest population with 78 per cent below age 30 (Republic of Uganda 2015: 3). Yet young people have many unmet ASRH needs (Republic of Uganda 2010) as well as a high risk of sexual violence. Girls in particular face severe challenges due to gender inequality – including early marriage and childbearing, sexually exploitative work and trafficking, female genital cutting, unsafe abortion, and harmful traditional practices (MWCYA 2014). In Uganda 56 per cent of women experience physical violence by age 15, and 28 per cent of women aged 15–49 experience sexual violence, compared to 9 per cent of men. Alarming, 98 per cent of children report physical or emotional violence, and 76 per cent report sexual violence (United Nations in Uganda 2016: 15).

CSE has been limited and unsystematic in both countries. Where available, sex education tends to focus on HIV/AIDS prevention and

abstinence (Shuey *et al.* 1999; Muyinda, Nakuya, Whitworth and Pool 2004; Human Rights Watch 2005). In Ethiopia, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have implemented extracurricular, grass-roots sex education (FGAE 2014), but these efforts are weak, fragmented and under-evaluated (Federal Ministry of Health 2015). The Ministry of Education in Ethiopia has only recently introduced a ‘school-based HIV/AIDS, sexual and reproductive health intervention’ (Federal Ministry of Education 2015) as part of select secondary school subjects. The Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports has only recently added sexuality education to the secondary school curriculum to be piloted in 2017 under the ‘life education learning area’ (Birungi 2015; Okoth 2013).

Ethiopia lags behind other eastern African countries in ICT, with 64 per cent overall mobile phone coverage (Adam 2012: 4). But mobile phone use has increased exponentially in recent years, especially among out-of-school youth: a 2014 study in Kampala by Swahn *et al.* found that 47 per cent of youth owned a mobile phone. Though ‘ownership did not vary by sex’, it was higher among independent youth over 18 (Swahn *et al.* 2014: 600). Our preliminary observations in both countries indicated that aside from consuming Western-produced pornography, greater access to ICT has engendered more ‘home-grown’ pornography – including amateur and commercial child pornography – and ‘revenge porn’ (private SEM shared publicly, often by an ex-lover who wishes to shame his/her ex-partner) (UK Government n.d.), with women commonly being targeted in Africa (Nakkazi 2016).

Both countries place legal and social prohibitions on SEM, but anti-pornography laws have been poorly enforced, and young people reported easy access to SEM. Pornography probably falls into the category of Obscene or Indecent Publications in the Ethiopian Penal Code (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 2004), whose production, possession, display and distribution are all punishable under the Crimes Tending to Corrupt Morals section, Articles 640–44. Though the Ethiopian government tends to place limits on people’s internet freedoms due to concerns over state security, it still tolerates access to social media and SEM (CIPESA 2014: 9). Pornography is also considered obscene under Uganda’s Penal Code Act section 166 (Republic of Uganda 1950), but it does not clearly define pornography. The 2014 Anti-pornography Act defines pornography as ‘any representation of the sexual parts of a person for primarily sexual excitement’ (Republic of Uganda 2014), but it has been misinterpreted as a law regulating women’s clothing (Tajuba 2014), prompting vigilante public stripping of women (SIHA Network 2015). Even the state Minister for Ethics and Integrity keeps using the law to justify penalising indecent dressing and nudity, as in the recent case involving a Makerere University lecturer who stripped as a traditional form of protest (*New Vision* 2016).

### 3 Objectives

As an independent offshoot of the Save the Children project in Ethiopia and Uganda, this study aimed to establish the nature of youth SEM

**Figure 1** The Ethiopia research team – the principal investigator Kristen Cheney (back row, fourth from left) with supervisors, YPRs, and data analyst Maki Suyama (front row, second from right), July 2015



Photo Kristen Cheney.

consumption as a baseline for future studies. Formative research indicated that SEM was widely available to young people in the study areas, yet little empirical evidence existed detailing young people's consumption and production of SEM, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Its relationship to CSE programmes could thus be further explored in order to provide a basis for strengthening local capacity relating to knowledge management about SEM and service provision of CSE. The findings could then be used to help create CSE programming that is better equipped to respond to youths' local realities.

#### 4 Methods

To obtain as clear and accurate a picture as possible on a sensitive topic about which young people may hesitate to open up to adult researchers, we adopted an intersectional, youth-led participatory research approach. We recruited YPR teams from previous CSE research sites, including urban and rural areas with varying levels of ICT accessibility:

- Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (urban)
- Gelan, Ethiopia (rural)
- Kampala, Uganda (urban)
- Agago, Uganda (rural).

The team was led by the principal investigator Kristen Cheney and in each country by local research coordinators, Anteneh Mekonnen Yimer in Ethiopia and Annah Kamusiime in Uganda. International research collaboration was important for combining research experience with local knowledge to yield more comparative evidence. The coordinators were responsible for recruitment, coordination, and support of supervisors and YPRs. YPRs were chosen in consultation with supervisors based on their research and sexual and reproductive health

and rights (SRHR) experience (for example, many had been youth peer educators), with an aim towards gender balance. The supervisors were adults in their communities – either teachers or youth group advisers – who could help guide the YPRs on a daily basis, with the consultation of the local research coordinators. If the YPRs did not feel comfortable going to a supervisor, they could also consult the local research coordinator. Two in-school and two out-of-school YPRs were selected in each of four locations, for a total of 16 (Figure 1).

Training commenced with the first four YPR team workshops in March 2015, familiarising teams with basic sexuality and research concepts, as well as data-gathering techniques. YPRs also helped shape the research design through their feedback. Several issues that arose through a review of current literature about young people's exposure to pornography guided this process.

#### 4.1 Issues to address

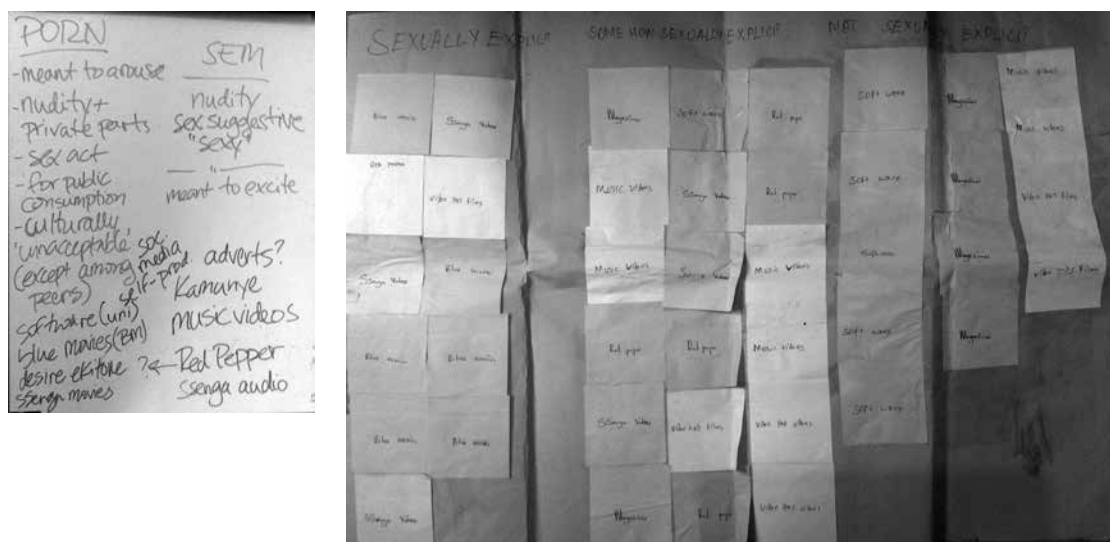
In light of their findings and identification of gaps in the literature around children's exposure to pornography, Horvath *et al.* (2013) recommended that research be conducted that:

- 1 Investigates what children and young people think pornography is and the content of what they describe as pornographic;
- 2 Investigates whether there are links between the pornography that children and young people are exposed to and/or access and their attitudes towards, aspirations about and feelings towards relationships and sex (*op. cit.*: 66).

We therefore designed our research partially around these needs. We also kept issues identified by Horvath *et al.* (2013) at the forefront of research design:

- *Pornography vs SEM.* Previous studies have lacked clear and comparable definitions of pornography versus other SEM, or even previous trends in pornography, so that we do not often know whether the young study participants have the same concept of pornography as the researchers. Nor do we get a clear sense of the content they are viewing, which – given trends in the porn industry – may be much more extreme than they were even a few years ago. So we set out to have YPRs clarify what media forms and content young people considered pornographic along a sliding scale of sexual explicitness. By listing different media on a flipchart and discussing them, YPRs created a contextualised spectrum of SEM (see Figures 2 and 3). We also gathered local terminology and slang, such as 'blue movies' in Uganda and 'PB' for 'playboy' in Ethiopia, as well as colourful euphemisms such as 'software' and 'German karate'. YPRs considered forms of SEM such as music videos and magazines, while often explicit in varying degrees, were not necessarily pornographic due to their social acceptability. The definition of pornography was thus a matter of form (images and videos distributed through

Figures 2 and 3 Working out local definitions of pornography vs SEM in the first Kampala YPR training workshop, March 2015 (left), and the last Kampala workshop, October 2015



Photos Kristen Cheney.

clandestine means), content (the degree and types of sexual activity being depicted) and social acceptability, i.e. pornography was widely available but not acceptable in the eyes of adult authority figures such as parents and teachers. Because of the ubiquity of SEM, however, our qualitative discussions tended to focus on young people's interactions with what they considered 'pornography'.

- *Access vs exposure.* Horvath *et al.* (2013) drew a distinction between access – actively seeking out pornography – and exposure, involuntarily viewing pornographic images. This is significant because previous studies indicated that young people’s experiences of access and exposure tend to be gendered: boys are much more likely to actively seek access to pornography, while girls are more often exposed through being sent unsolicited digital images, etc (*ibid.*). These are not mutually exclusive categories, however: an incident could start as one and become another. For example, explicit pop-up advertisements may expose a child to SEM. However, if he or she decides to click on it to access more of such images, it constitutes access. Still, the distinction is important for clarifying young people’s motivations and intent in respect of pornography.
- *Consumption vs production.* We also quickly realised in the initial workshop discussions that to track young people’s actual experiences with SEM, we could not just study their consumption through access and exposure; we also had to record the incidence of young people producing and even distributing SEM through such means as social media. This would more holistically capture the reality of young people’s involvement with SEM.



Table 1 Survey respondents

Demographic characteristic	Category	Ethiopia		Uganda	
		Rural (%)	Urban (%)	Urban (%)	Rural (%)
Age	12–17	47	25	53	46
	18–21	29	47	28	27
	22–26	24	28	19	24
	No data	0	0	0	3
Sex	Male	50	50	51	53
	Female	50	50	48	45
Marital status	Single	78	74	87	78
	Married	12	8	5	18
	Relationship	10	17	0	2
	Divorced	0	1	1	1

We decided in initial consultation with all research teams that due to lack of even basic information, we needed to conduct more comprehensive research than was initially planned (eight focus group discussions – FGDs). We therefore designed a new two-phase study plan: the first would involve administering a rapid-assessment quantitative survey to get a sense of the scope of young people’s interaction with various forms of pornography. The second would probe emergent issues deeper through more qualitative methods of FGDs and interviews.

#### 4.2 Phase I: Survey

We designed a general survey to first get a picture of which young people were being exposed to or accessing what kinds of SEM, with what frequency, and where: survey contents were organised around the themes of access and exposure, experiences with and attitudes towards SEM, and individual and social/cultural influences on SEM/pornography use. We also gathered basic data on their level of sex education, age of sexual debut, etc. Each YPR team then tested the tool and adjusted it to the local environment. YPRs collected more than 200 responses for each country, with fairly even gender and location distribution. YPRs surveyed a convenience sample totalling 414 people (Table 1). The data was then coded and analysed using STATA and SPSS (v.20).

#### 4.3 Phase II: Qualitative data

After holding data analysis workshops with each YPR team in July 2015 – in which we summarised and discussed the implications of survey findings – we designed a set of informal qualitative questions to triangulate the survey data and deepen our understandings of young people’s engagement with SEM in the key focus areas mentioned above, as well as discussion

Table 2 Focus group discussions

Ethiopia	Urban		Rural		Total
	In-school	Out-of-school	In-school	Out-of-school	
All-male	1	1	1	1	4
All-female	1	1	1	1	4
Mixed gender	1	1	1	1	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>12</b>

Uganda	Urban		Rural		Total
	In-school	Out-of-school	In-school	Out-of-school	
All-male	1	1	1	1	4
All-female	1	1	1	1	4
Mixed gender	1	1	1	1	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>12</b>

of the consequences of SEM. We conducted 12 FGDs per country across the various demographics (see Table 2). Each YPR also conducted three in-depth interviews with peers, totalling 48 (24 boys, 24 girls).

Qualitative data was transcribed, coded and thematically analysed. In October 2015 we conducted final data-synthesising workshops in each country to discuss the qualitative data through various mapping and visual reporting exercises. Finally, we held discussions of our collective interpretations of the overall findings and solicited YPRs' recommendations.

## 5 Summary of findings

The findings that emerged fell into four main themes.

### 5.1 Access and exposure: age, gender, and locale

Nearly all respondents reported exposure to SEM/pornography – including violent, hard-core – before the age of 18. In Uganda, rural youth reported higher levels of exposure (95 per cent) than urban youth (91 per cent). The youngest age of first exposure reported was eight years old, through observing an older sibling consuming pornographic images. In fact, 50 per cent of young people in Uganda reported being exposed to pornography by the age of 12. We also noted a downward trend in Ethiopia, where the younger the respondent, the younger their age of first exposure, for boys and girls. More males (95 per cent) than females (90 per cent) reported having come into contact with SEM. Boys tended to seek access to pornography on a regular basis, whereas girls were more commonly exposed to pornography – often through friends (of both sexes but more commonly male friends) sending or showing them unsolicited SEM. Common exposure vectors were through mobile phones (Bluetooth) and internet cafes, video shops and video halls (Figure 4).

**Figure 4** YPR Shakirah discussing the results of the mapping exercise locating where young people gain access or are exposed to pornography in their community

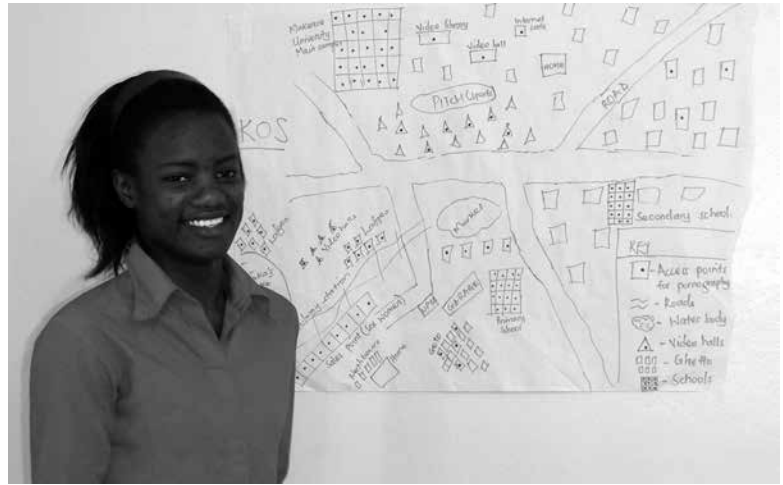


Photo Kristen Cheney.

Most reported that it was easy to access pornography due to its ubiquitous presence. As one Ugandan boy said, 'It's everywhere. It's in your hands all the time, you have it in your bed, it's on the streets, and it's in the car you travel in. Whenever you want it you will find it.' In rural Ethiopia, young people reported that schools were common places for the exchange of pornographic images, whether one still attended school or not: boys especially would gather on school grounds after hours and circulate images, some on paper but more often on their phones via Bluetooth.

One trend was that young people's interaction with pornography went beyond consumption to production, particularly with increased access to smartphones and digital cameras. For example, 11 per cent of Ethiopian survey respondents under 18 (of which 54 per cent were female) reported partners taking their pictures and posting them on Facebook or in WhatsApp groups. In one rural Uganda all-female FGD, girls explained that their partners who work outside of their communities occasionally ask them to take nude pictures of themselves and send them via WhatsApp. Similarly, participants in a mixed-gender FGD in urban Uganda said that it was 'normal' to take videos of themselves during sexual intercourse and even circulate them. While some girls expressed discomfort with this, they also felt under social pressure to consent to boys circulating images; others reported that boys sometimes filmed sex without their partners' consent.

## **5.2 Motivations and expectations: the sociopolitical economy of pornography consumption and production**

In FGDs, young people – male and female – agreed that they consumed pornography primarily to get ideas about new sexual styles and positions. This was especially important to respondents in Uganda, whereas in Ethiopia, the primary objective was to 'release sexual

Figure 5 Advertisement in Kampala tabloid, *Red Pepper*

Photo Kristen Cheney.

feelings'. In both cases, though, young men and women indicated that consuming pornography was an important aspect of their social activity with peers: either they watched pornography together (which is how many were first exposed) or they spent time talking about pornography they had viewed separately. There is considerable peer pressure to stay current with the sexual trends depicted in pornography: 'During conversations, you hear your friends using terminology you are not aware of; they talk about sex styles you don't know, and you look like a villager who was left behind' (out-of-school male, 16 years, Kampala). Unemployed young men also talked of pornography as a distraction from the stress they felt at not being able to find work.

While it is impossible to prove causality, the study results indicated that pornography consumption influenced young people's sexual expectations. For example, most under-18 and in-school respondents in both countries regardless of gender tended to believe that pornography 'shows what sex is really like for normal people'. This could have adverse effects, however; girls especially complained that pornography and SEM created difficult sexual expectations of them. For example, young men and women in Kampala frequently referenced a sex tape that had been released by the ex-boyfriend of a popular singer named Desire as revenge porn after their breakup. It quickly circulated through social media, and 'everyone' had seen the tape many times over, even when they had not sought it out. Girls reported that boys consequently pressured them to 'be more like Desire'. This was a particularly difficult request, as the video revealed that Desire had had her labia extended – a cultural practice in some parts of Uganda – and produced an exceptional amount of vaginal fluid during sex. Boys were asking girls, 'Why can't you give me the same *kitone*' (natural gift) as Desire?' Such demands were driving girls to seek labia extensions (well after the usual age that it is done) as well as herbal remedies to produce more sexual fluids.

Such activity must also be placed in the context of the local sexual economy. Urban participants, especially in Kampala, reported incidents of boys secretly videotaping sex with girls, girls producing their own sex

tapes or partners agreeing to make personal sex videotapes in efforts to make money or become famous. Some young women who actively engaged in sex work in both countries, or had friends who did so, said they produced and distributed SEM of themselves to recruit new clients. But even girls not engaged in sex work were encouraged by male partners to take photos or make videos in order to lend them out and make money. Such production appears to be encouraged by the broader local sexual economy: one Kampala YPR brought an advertisement from a racy tabloid paper, *Red Pepper*, to a workshop. It said, 'We pay cash for pictures, videos and sex tapes... Get rich, don't die trying' (Figure 5).

Social media was also facilitating the production and distribution of SEM by young women looking for partners to financially support them, particularly university women: in Addis Ababa, some FGD participants said that local sex workers complained that when a university opened in their neighbourhood, it 'ruined their business' because female students looking for 'sugar daddies' were 'stealing' clients from them. Others discussed Facebook pages such as Ethiopian Beauty, where young women were posting semi-nude pictures of themselves in hopes of finding a foreign boyfriend who would sponsor them to emigrate.

### 5.3 Behaviours and attitudes: instruction in sexual violence?

When asked how pornography made them feel, young people generally reported positive associations, using words such as 'joy' and 'excitement' to describe their reactions to pornography. This was the case for boys more than for girls, however; some girls also felt somewhat compromised by pornography in that it portrayed women as subject to men's sexual needs, reinforcing unequal power relations between men and women. As one out-of-school girl in Addis Ababa shared in an interview, 'When I see pornography, it makes me feel terrible about being a woman', because of the way she thought women were degraded in pornography. In contrast, Ethiopian boys in FGDs said that watching pornography helped them to be 'male' and 'fierce' during sexual intercourse. These findings correspond with evidence that pornography tends to focus on male heterosexuality, promoting constant male sexual readiness and men's domination of sex (Flood 2007; McLaughlin *et al.* 2012). Moreover, pornography consumption has also been linked to diminished tolerance among men for gender equality and greater tolerance for and participation in aggression and sexual violence against women (Flood 2010).

Regardless of how pornography made them feel, however, almost all respondents acknowledged that they were practising or were trying to practise what they saw in pornography. This can be particularly problematic when pornography contains violence, which is common. One study found that 88 per cent of popular pornography contains verbal/physical aggression – usually toward women (Bridges *et al.* 2010).

Participants tended to agree that watching pornography affected their peer's attitudes and behaviours (if not their own). Rural Ethiopian

students noticed that their friends started dressing differently and changing other day-to-day behaviours once they began watching pornography regularly, as well as becoming increasingly violent after viewing violent sex. The Uganda survey positively correlated frequency of access with 'riskier' sexual attitudes. In one FGD, in-school male youth said that porn encouraged them to have unprotected sex because they found the unprotected sexual acts they saw in pornography more exciting. In Ethiopia, some boys reported lax attitudes about consent after viewing pornography. In one Gelan FGD, a boy stated: 'After I see porn, I can even go have sex with a mentally ill person', meaning someone who had limited capacity to consent. Girls reported being coerced into sex while watching pornography with a partner.

Most important for our objectives was that young people in both countries roundly considered pornography to be a greater influence on their sexual attitudes and identity development than either sex education or local culture. In Ethiopia, 73 per cent said pornography/SEM affected their sexual attitudes and behaviours, while only 45 per cent said that sex education did and 55 per cent said that local culture did. In Uganda, 84 per cent said that pornography/SEM affected their sexual attitudes and behaviours, versus 50 per cent for sex education and 56 per cent for local culture. They expressed much more satisfaction with pornography as an instructional instrument than with sex education – though this must be placed in the context of low rates of sex education coverage: only 14 per cent in Ethiopia reported receiving sex education while 56 per cent of Ugandan respondents did. This was highest among rural, out-of-school youth, who received sex education through their local youth associations. They also tended to report the highest satisfaction rates with sex education, but these topped out at 46 per cent (Ethiopian rural out-of-school) with no significant age or gender variation.

In Uganda, rural and urban youth of both sexes generally lamented that there are no longer traditional, organised, reliable sex education practices. In Agago, for example, boys used to participate in *wang-oo* (fireplace discussions) with their fathers while mothers would counsel the girls. In Kampala, *kojas* (maternal uncles) would provide sex education for boys whereas *ssengas* (paternal aunts) would provide girls with advice on sex according to cultural expectations. These programmes have been weakened, in Agago by war and insecurity over the last 30 years, and in Kampala by the gradual commercialisation of *ssenga* and *koja* roles (de Ridder 2013).<sup>1</sup> What remains takes the form of what one Agago girl termed 'sexual warnings', or abstinence messages – their mothers only tell them: 'If you go around opening your legs for every boy... you are going to become pregnant and no man will marry you, not forgetting that you are going to die of HIV/AIDS.' Pornography has filled the information gap about how sex is performed, and unlike advice from adults, it is readily available; it can also be watched in hiding, at one's convenience. However, surveys revealed that especially in-school children under 18 tended *not* to necessarily take pornography as instructional or as a substitute for sex education.

#### 5.4 Consequences

Despite their generally positive associations with pornography, young people listed many deleterious consequences of the identified patterns of their pornography use, including the stress of peer pressure and detachment from family and community. Several boys even self-identified as pornography ‘addicts’,<sup>2</sup> stating that they could not sleep before they had watched pornography. Girls also reported disproportionately suffering negative effects from pornography, such as rape and shame from the distribution of images of them by their sexual partners, including ‘revenge porn’, which affects their future relationships.

Young people reported that their grades would start to suffer when they watched pornography habitually. They could also suffer economically as – in Uganda, at least – young people often had to pay to watch pornography. Some ended up gambling or stealing from their parents in order to find the small sums of money needed to access pornography. However, they also acknowledged economic consequences beyond the purchase of pornography itself. As one out-of-school boy in Kampala noted, ‘After watching it, you have to go and buy “a kilo”’ – a euphemism for sex with a prostitute.

As noted earlier, girls’ production of SEM is linked to the broader sexual economy, in which this appears as one of the easier ways to earn money or find economic support. But they usually end up paying the social consequences of shame and stigma afterwards.

In sum, the study found that SEM is a part of a broader landscape of sexual violence and the sexual economy through which young people move in Ethiopia and Uganda. They seem to approach this with profound ambivalence: while SEM is omni-present and young people feel largely positive about it, study participants also suspected that it was probably a bad long-term influence on their sexual identity development in that it was out of sync with cultural norms and values. As one rural Ethiopian schoolboy quite strongly put it: ‘Pornography... is totally unacceptable and against religious, social and cultural values of the country and another way of the whites’ colonisation strategy on African people.’

Respondents also sent a clear message to those who design CSE programmes: they are in direct competition with pornography for young people’s hearts and minds; the young turned to pornography to learn about sex because what limited sex education they received was not meeting their needs, particularly with regard to their awakening desires and emotions. Much of the sex education they had experienced was abstinence-only; while many young people said they could respect that message on some level, they complained that these programmes did not tell them how to manage their sexual urges in order to actually achieve abstinence. Pornography, on the other hand, allows for the release of emotion – positive or negative – and is thus more popular than sex education amongst youth. They also felt that sex education

programmes were driven by adults' concerns about youth sexuality rather than their own concerns and needs. Consuming pornography was therefore seen as a way for young people to take charge of their own sexual knowledge – even though many realised it might not be the best source for information on sexual health.

## **6 Conclusion: recommendations for future directions**

In our final synthesising workshops, YPRs relayed some of the recommendations from their study respondents. While they thought attempts to ban pornography would be ineffective, they thought parents, communities and government should make more effort to try to prevent it from reaching younger children, and/or to teach young people how to approach it more critically. This could be accomplished through the development of media literacy skills that would counteract the hegemonic misrepresentations of sex and relationships (Charmaraman and Low 2013: 247). Adding media literacy components to existing CSE programmes could thus help young people critically examine SEM and programmes could also use ICT to help youth access better, healthier sources of ASRH information.

Findings indicate that it would be prudent for sex education programmes to rethink their approaches, which in these contexts currently focus on abstinence and rarely make mention of pornography's influence. There is a clear need to address it head-on and develop more holistic, media-responsive CSE curricula that will meet the needs that pornography currently meets, but in healthier ways. YPRs recommended that sexuality education should start much earlier than it currently does (e.g. in primary rather than secondary school), and that it involve entire families, since young people felt that they could not go to their parents with their questions about sex. They called for more youth-centred sex education based on the actual needs and desires of young people, including the information they currently seek from pornography. The delivery method of sex education programmes should also be more interesting to young people. They listed the use of media, illustrations and demonstrations as well as delivery by knowledgeable, youth-friendly professionals as desirable. They also asked that sex education be available all the time, everywhere – just like pornography.

Finally, our findings also pointed to the need for more youth-participatory ASRH research in general. As noted in previous youth participatory research (Cheney 2011), we found that involving young people as co-researchers and co-creators of knowledge yielded not only more 'authentic' results from their peers but more transformative potential for our YPRs, their relationships and their communities. YPRs reported overwhelmingly positive experiences of conducting research, including increased ASRH knowledge, individual confidence, better ability to communicate across gender and generational divides, greater openness with peers and elders about sexuality, and more critical engagement with media.



We hope to share our findings with relevant policymakers and community members, and to advocate for CSE programming that will help young people to cope with the adverse effects of pornography and other SEM on their sexual identity development and decision-making.

### Notes

- \* We acknowledge the generous support of Share-Net Netherlands for making this research possible. We also greatly appreciate the efforts of youth peer researchers and their supervisors.
- 1 The queen of Buganda (central region including Kampala) has recently organised a yearly life skills youth camp called the Nabagereka's Kisakate that has become quite popular. Designed for very young adolescents up to young adults, it teaches some sex education, but as with most formal sex education programmes, it too tends to focus on abstinence.
- 2 We acknowledge that there is some debate over whether one can technically become 'addicted' to pornography, but we use this word because the respondents themselves used it in reference to their own problematic, habitual viewing of pornography.

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